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Feminist Interpretations of David Hume by Anne Jaap Jacobson (Book Review)

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In this latest addition to the Re-reading the Canon series (a series of collections each devoted to feminist interpretations of a single philosopher), we are offered thirteen essays on Hume's philosophy, covering his views on metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy, religion, aesthetics politics, and history. They address all of his main works and many of his less discussed essays. This diverse collection is bound together by the theme of feminism, but how this theme works itself in varies considerably from essay to essay. There are, broadly, four different ways that feminism enters into the interpretations.

First, there are essays which show how current feminist theory can benefit from some Humean insights; they argue that if we read (or re-read) Hume in a particular way, we can address concerns or problems that feminist theorists face. Christine Swanton's 'Compassion as a virtue in Hume' is an example of this kind of feminist reading. Swanton looks carefully at Hume's discussion of compassion, sympathy and benevolence, and convincingly argues that his view has much in common with an ethics of care and can help diffuse the objection that such an ethics is overly demanding, causing individuals to be lost in the pain of others.

Second, there are essays which show how feminist theory can help Hume; they argue that he could escape some of his contradictions if he were to adopt some insights from feminist theory. This view is expressed, for example, in Jennifer A. Herdt's 'Superstition and the Timid Sex', the only essay on religion. Herdt offers a novel and well-argued interpretation, suggesting that in Hume's comment that the 'weak and timid sex is responsible for leading men into superstition', we can find the seeds of a feminist analysis and critique of the ways in which religion reinforces the socialization of women into prescribed sex roles (283). Hume's thought is in tension on this matter; he thought the socialization both necessary and dangerous, but, if we focus only on what he says about the danger, Herdt shows how a feminist critique can be gleaned from his writings.

Third, there are those essays that focus on the misogynistic aspects of Hume's philosophy, pointing out the limits of any feminist-friendly reading of Hume. These are the least interesting type and do not offer much of philosophical value. For example in 'The Metaphorics of Hume's Gendered Scepticism', Aaron A. Smuts argues that, for Hume, imagination and nature are both feminine. They seduce and deceive the male philosopher so that he cannot help but maintain beliefs that lack any rational foundation. The notion that, for Hume, nature is a 'bad woman' does not seem consistent with all the gratefulness he has for nature saving him from his skeptical moods.

Last, there are a number of essays which recognize concerns that are common to both Hume and feminists, and argue that Hume is a philosopher whose views are of particular importance to feminist thought. Many of the strongest essays are of this type. For example the first three essays, which are all concerned with Book One of the *Treatise*, argue that Hume's view of knowledge, reason and his conception of philosophy should be of particular interest to feminist philosophers. In 'Hume: The Reflective Women's Epistemologist?', Annette Baier points out that Hume recognizes, as do many feminists, that 'norms — including norms for knowledge acquisition — are social in their genesis as well as in their intended scope' (30). Hume's epistemology, she says, is 'fallibilist and cooperative' (31). In 'Hume on the Passion of Truth', Genevieve Lloyd explores Hume's version of the 'wholeness' of mind, where passions, imagination and intellect are unified instead of polarized as they are in more traditional masculine philosophy. In 'Reconceptualizing Reasoning and Writing the Philosophical Canon: The Case of David Hume', Anne Jaap Jacobson argues that, like many feminist philosophers, Hume questions the traditional ideal of philosophy which strives to conceive of concepts in a purely rational manner.

A number of the conclusions of these three essays are correct. Hume does think both passions and reason are essential components of humans; reason does not get exalted as it does among many (though not all) of Hume's predecessors. But we also find overstatements and overemphases in these essays. For example, Jacobson is right that Hume questioned the value of trying to find final answers to philosophical questions, but when she claims that Hume 'explicitly rejects the goal of arriving at consistent answers to the questions addressed' (61), she goes too far. Even though Hume does not claim his way of solving a problem is the last word on the matter, he did hope that his theories 'might stand the test of the most critical examination' (*Treatise* I.iv.7.14). So he still aimed for consistency and harmony in his philosophical theories.

Two of the most interesting essays are on Hume's moral philosophy, but in each feminism seems to enter in as an after-thought; one can imagine them standing on their own with the feminist parts subtracted. Joyce L. Jenkins and Rob Shaver's 'Mr. Hobbes Could Have Said No More' is a well-argued piece focusing on a troubling passage in Hume's second *Enquiry* where he says that, if there were a species of creatures intermingled with men who were greatly inferior in both mind and body, 'we should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures', but should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them.

Jenkins and Shaver suggest that Hume's recommendation of humanity over justice is justified on broadly utilitarian grounds, that humanity would better serve the inferior party. The necessarily general and inflexible nature of justice could stand in the way of what would best serve these people. The superior could help the inferior more, they argue, if they could make use of the flexibility of humanity. It is hard to see what is the feminist part of this

interpretation. It comes in the second section which suggests that with a few insights from Mill, Hume need not see women as inferior creatures.

Jacqueline Taylor's 'Hume and the Reality of Value' is a careful discussion about Hume's metaethics, and rightfully criticizes those who view Hume as a non-cognitivist, pointing out that Hume's view is much more complex and more integrative, with moral features and sentiments as reciprocal and mutually guiding concepts (116). But it is unclear what work feminism is doing in Taylor's piece. Christopher Williams' 'False Delicacy', which focuses on Hume's essay 'Of the Standard of Taste', is an insightful discussion of aesthetic appreciation where again the feminism seems inessential.

What is best in this collection is that it focuses attention on some of the often neglected aspects of Hume's philosophy. Given that feminists are concerned with exposing and investigating what is overlooked, this uncovering may be what is most centrally feminist about the book. It also succeeds, as Jacobson urges in her introduction, in encouraging readers to ask more questions, to continue the discussion and to find new and creative ways of reading Hume.

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